

from (Young, 2002) "STATION TO STATION: REINVENTING PRACTICE IN THE ENGLISH CLASSROOM AND BEYOND"

Using Learning Stations with Literature: A Novel Approach to "Stationing" *The Scarlet Letter* and *Beowulf*

Milner and Milner (1999) provide a clear sense of the structure and organization of learning stations as well as pointing out the potential benefits of this instructional strategy with regard to having students construct their own learning. Using learning stations for literature study creates and promotes a student-centered, cooperative-learning atmosphere in which several topics can be scrutinized and experienced while each student contributes, discusses, composes, and thinks. Beginning with a common subject, a literary text in this case, students are encouraged to build upon what they know and create links between the word and the world, helping to make the literary canon more relevant. While my interest in learning stations relates to employing this strategy as a tool for facilitating inquiry-based learning, Beth provides examples of how learning stations can be implemented to further enhance the understanding of two commonly read literary classics.

Using learning stations for literature study creates and promotes a student-centered, cooperative-learning atmosphere in which several topics can be scrutinized and experienced while each student contributes, discusses, composes, and thinks.

Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and the Old English epic, *Beowulf*, are standard fare in most high school literature curricula. One way to explore some of the major issues and themes in these works would be to incorporate literature-based learning stations. The intent with this strategy is to reinvent the typical lecture/discussion format of talking about the novel so that it becomes more of an active, meaning-making process, one in which students forge connections between these classics and other texts, their own lives, and the outside world. A synopsis of the five learning stations Beth created for each classic follows. Over a two-day period in her blocked eleventh- and ninth-grade English classes, students

worked in small groups to complete their cycle through the stations, spending approximately twenty minutes at each one. As students completed work at each station, they filed it in their writing portfolios which were submitted for a grade at the conclusion of the activity.

Learning Stations for Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*

Station 1 - "The Devil Inside": Given the societal standards of the historical setting of Hawthorne's novel, at this station students are pushed to explore some of the religious threads woven throughout the work. They are also encouraged to explore Puritanical ethics and beliefs and the extent to which the devil in Hawthorne's novel influences characters. After discussing three characters in terms of Puritanical morality, students listen to the song "The Devil Inside" by INXS and analyze the lyrics as a means of preparing to compose a response in which they speculate about the devil's role in the lives of the characters from the novel. The song asserts that "every single one of us [has] the devil inside" but implies that not everyone acts on this supposed internal influence. Students are challenged to not only interpret the song's meaning but to apply the proposed theory therein to the Puritan world of Hawthorne's novel. Students leave this station with a written explanation of their analysis and quotations from the text in support.

Station 2 - Interrogative Reading: Since beginning *The Scarlet Letter*, students have been interacting with the novel by composing questions as they read. At this station, students become facilitators and responders as they share and respond to questions they have been generating as a part of their individual reader response to the novel. Within their small group of five or six students, students pair up or work as a trio in sharing, refining, generating, and answering questions related to their reading and comprehension of *The Scarlet Letter*. The process begins with students exchanging their questions with one another and reading them in an effort to try and find answers together. Through a focused dialogue, students speculate about possible answers, discuss which questions they value the most, look for convergences in their lines of questioning, and look more critically at Hawthorne's story. This station empowers students to make use of their own questions while getting them to

question their questions as well. Topics vary, including questions of basic plot structure, analysis, judgment, and hypothesis. Setting their own pace and agenda, students take notes as they discuss the focus questions.

As the culminating activity at this station, students contribute to a bank of questions for an archive. As a pair or trio, they write down on note cards two or more of their more insightful revised questions to leave in a file box at the station. As new groups begin working at this station, they are also encouraged to look at the questions of the groups who preceded them. Finally, students are asked to write a short reflection piece in which they explain how they worked with their partners to answer the student-generated and teacher-generated questions and what this process yielded for them.

Station 3 - "Solitude": After reading Ella Wheeler Wilcox's "Solitude," a poem in which the author contemplates life in terms of the pleasure of company and death as the solitude we all have to face alone, students discuss the relationship between Hester's world and their own. Students examine the role that the Puritan society plays in *The Scarlet Letter* and then compose a diary entry in the voice of one of the characters. Next, students discuss the social situation and ethical standards in modern day America. Using Wilcox's poem and the novel as catalysts, students decide whether or not Hester's world relates to their own world. Each student then composes a second journal entry, this time writing in their own voice, from their own point of view. Both of the diary entries become a part of the students' writing portfolios.

Station 4 - Current Events: In an effort to forge connections between the novel and contemporary American society, this station provides students with the opportunity to interact with relevant artifacts of contemporary culture such as articles and cartoons from magazines and newspapers. Students are asked to relate the significance of one or more of these artifacts to the novel and, in turn, to explain how the events, characters, and themes of *The Scarlet Letter* relate to our present day society as evidenced in these artifacts. Students compose an analysis of the artifact as well as a description of the artifact's connection to the word/world of the novel and the world in which we live. Again, these short pieces are added to the students' writing portfolios.

Students are asked to relate the significance of one or more of these artifacts to the novel and, in turn, to explain how the events, characters, and themes of *The Scarlet Letter* relate to our present day society as evidenced in these artifacts.

Station 5 - Text Work: This station requires students to research a specific question using the text of the novel. Students gain the practice of supporting their ideas and answers with specific textual references, thereby developing the necessary skill of strengthening their written arguments while becoming more comfortable with using the text as a tool to formulate initial forays into literary criticism. The prompt asks students to contemplate Pearl's role in the novel.

Before composing the essay, students are encouraged to pre-write and organize their thoughts by generating a thesis statement or argument. Students are cued to brainstorm three main points that they will use to support their thesis. Then to support the argument, they find, quote, and cite textual evidence to support their main points. As students weigh the balance of Pearl's normality, they lay the groundwork for the writing process for a more in-depth literary analysis essay as a part of the overall unit on the novel.

Learning Stations for *Beowulf*

Station 1 - Composing Alliterative Verse: Playing with language is the errand for students while at this learning station. After discussing the aspects of alliterative verse in class, students read three lines from Seamus Heaney's recent translation. Analyzing and discussing the devices used (e.g., repeated consonant and vowel sounds, caesuras, and kennings), students apply their knowledge of alliterative verse by composing a group poem about English class. They are welcome to be silly, to have fun, and to work as a group. These *Beowulf*-inspired pieces are shared aloud after students have visited each learning station.

Station 2 - The Image of the Monster: While at this station, students are encouraged to connect the written and the visual as they investigate how characters' attributes would be depicted, both literally and metaphorically, on paper and in three dimensions. In a previous class, students created visual images of Grendel. After brainstorming a list of adjectives and character traits belonging to the monster, they choose an image of the monster (from a pile of student-produced pictures) which best exemplifies their ideas. Next, students compose a short paragraph about why they chose the selected image. Then, using a ball of clay, students shape a three-dimensional representation of one of the other characters in the story. Their shapes should be literal and metaphorical, life-like and interpretive. After shaping the characters, students explain their figures, noting both artistic and symbolic features.

Station 3 - Point of View: Having discussed the importance of perspective earlier in the year, students at this station analyze how plot is influenced by point of view. Each student receives an excerpt from John Gardner's *Grendel*. With all group members following along as one student reads aloud, students think about how the tale of Beowulf differs when told by Grendel. After reading and discussing, students compose a narrative segment of the Anglo-Saxon epic through the eyes of another character. Selecting one episode from the tale to revisit, students compose and then share their creations, discussing the significance of point of view.

Station 4 - The Braggadocio Beot: In an attempt to bring *Beowulf* into the present, at this station students look keenly at several images of athletes, world leaders, and popular culture figures. After discussing the boasting in Beowulf and its purposes, students analyze the role of bragging in their own culture. Identifying the people in the photographs, defining their roles, and discussing how they talk about themselves leads students to questions of evaluation and judgment; essentially, they must decide if boasting is a tool, an impediment, or both. Next, turning to the discussion between Unferth and Beowulf in the text, students discuss why boasting was necessary and then compare the situation to the modern day examples. Seeking connections between the text and their lives, they compose a paragraph of their findings.

In an attempt to bring *Beowulf* into the present, at this station students look keenly at several images of athletes, world leaders, and popular culture figures.

Station 5 - A Study in Translation: Encouraging students to analyze the importance of translation, they will read a selected passage from the text aloud. Next, each will read the same segment from Seamus Heaney's newer translation. (Copies are provided at the station.) Paying close attention to diction and figurative language, students will draw comparisons and contrasts between the two translations. Carefully looking for examples of alliterative verse and kennings in both, students will seek slight differences in tone and intensity. After discussing their findings, students will analyze the importance of translation using textual evidence from the two versions of Beowulf. They will compose a paragraph stating their findings.

Written work from each station is evaluated as part of a writing portfolio collected upon class completion of the learning station activities.

Conclusion

Our hope with this article is to provide some ideas for reinventing the learning stations strategy based on our success in using it ourselves (and, in my case, the success of the teachers with whom I've worked who have used it as well). Ideally, Beth and I would have you circulating through our stations to get a fuller sense of the experience, but print does not, of course, allow for that. While the station outlines provided cannot substitute for the experiential nature of the learning stations strategy, we hope that you are able to get a sense of the success we have had with it and the potential worth it might have for you and your own students. As always, the real power of reinvention rests with you, the classroom teacher. We provide our examples not as blueprints for success, but as a means for inspiring you to think about how the magic of learning stations could be cast differently from your point of view, from the unique venue in which you are creating your own *dance of disruption*.

Works Cited

- Bowie, D. (1976). *Station to Station*. Station to Station. London: RCA.
- Hoffman, J.V. (1992, Feb.). Critical Reading/Thinking Across the Curriculum: Using I-Charts to Support Learning. *Language Arts*, 69, 121-127.
- Kutz, E. and Roskelly, H. (1991). *An Unquiet Pedagogy: Transforming Practice in the English Classroom*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Publishers.
- Macrorie, K. (1988). *The I-Search Paper: Revised Edition of Searching Writing*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Milner, J. O. and Milner, L. F. M. (1999). *Bridging English. Second Edition*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill; 369-70.
- Short, K. G., Harste, J. C., with Burke, C. (1996). *Creating Classrooms for Authors and Inquirers*. Second Edition. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Carl Young, a former high school and middle school English language arts teacher, is Assistant Professor of English Education at Virginia Tech and co-editor for the English strand of Contemporary Issues in Technology and Teacher Education (<http://www.citejournal.org>). He earned his doctorate from the University of Virginia and is a former faculty member. While at UVa, he also served as the Associate Director of the Young Writers Workshop and co-taught Writing-Across-the-Curriculum (WAC) for the Off-Grounds Masters Program at various sites across the state. At Virginia Tech, he teaches courses in secondary English methods and teaching composition. He also facilitates field seminars and supervises student teaching internships. He and his wife Allyson, a high school English teacher, live in Blacksburg with their daughter Hannah.

Elizabeth Lucas, Beth, graduated from The University of Virginia in 1999, receiving her BA in English and MT in Secondary English Education. She teaches English and creative writing and sponsors the literary magazine at Monacan High School in Chesterfield, Virginia.
